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New Year's Greetings, 1939

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Happy New Year! boys and girls of the 4-H clubs. It is a joy to speak thus directly to so many of the more than a million country homes represented in the 4-H club membership. And to the more than two million fathers and mothers of club members, and the 135,000 local club leaders, Happy New Year! Aside from the boys and girls themselves, much of the credit for the splendid success of the year just closed and of all preceding years must go to you. To the county extension agents, men and women, and the State club agents and specialists, who have helped and encouraged the boys and girls in their work, Happy New Year! And to the ex-club members, of whom there are now more than seven million, some with a second generation of club members coming along, Happy New Year! What a wonderful family it is! How thrilling it is to stand here before the "mike" and extend greetings from the Department of Agriculture to a potential group of more than ten million, and to know that representatives of all of these groups just mentioned are listening in. Happy New Year to you all! It is especially an honor to extend greetings this year, because 1939 is an anniversary year. It is 25 years on the 8th of next May since the Federal Congress recognized the importance of agricultural extension work by making it a subject of National legislation. This law, the Smith-Lever Act of May 8, 1914, was named for former Congressman Lever of South Carolina and the late Senator Smith from Georgia, joint sponsors of the proposal in Congress. Nineteen thirty-nine, then, is the Silver Jubilee of Extension.

However, boys' and girls' club work is older than that. In the demonstration work carried on in the Southern States under the direction of the late Dr. Seaman A. Knapp, organized groups of boys and girls had found a large place as a demonstration agency in securing the adoption of better practices on the farms and in the homes. Indeed, it was the interest provoked by the success of these clubs that in a very large measure brought about the passage of this great Act of Congress. The first of these boys' and girls' demonstration clubs were organized in Holmes County, Mississippi in 1907, and that marks the birth of boys' and girls' club work as an official extension activity.

Of course there had been boys' and girls' clubs before that--I presume ever since there have been boys and girls for that matter. The first of these agricultural or nature study clubs in America of which I have any reliable historical record, was organized in Sycamore Grove School in Butler County, Ohio in 1828, more than a hundred years ago. It was much like the 4-H clubs of today; but of course neither it, nor many other similar sporadic developments since, had anything to do with the particular thing that we are talking about today--boys' and girls' clubs as a part of the organized system of extension work in agriculture and home economics carried on by the State college of agriculture and the U. S. Department of Agriculture, cooperating. These Mississippi clubs mark the real beginning of what we now call 4-H club work, and the U. S. Department of Agriculture, the Mississippi State College, the local farm people, and the schools were all interested in and participated in the organization of these clubs. You will notice I use the plural, because there were two clubs--one a corn club for the boys, and one a home science club for the girls--and both were organized on the same day. These
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two pioneer clubs were set up for the particular purpose of demonstrating better practices on farms and in the homes, to make better boys and better girls. There is no time here to tell you about these two first clubs, but it reads like a story of 1938 rather than 1907. Boys' and girls' 4-H club work then, as we now use the term, is 32 years old, and has such an interesting birthday and birthplace that I must tell you about it. These two clubs were organized on February 22, Washington's birthday, 1907, at Lexington, Mississippi-- a significant date and a significant place name. What stirring emotions they excite, "February 22," the birthday of the Father of our country, "Lexington," the name of the place where the shot heard around the world was fired. Lexington, Mississippi can very justly take its place along with Lexington, Massachusetts, for here, too, there was released a force destined to influence the people of many lands. Now that club work is such an important extension activity, so full of meaning and significance to so many people in our country, "February 22" and "Lexington" take on a new significance to club members everywhere, linking together as they do ideals of loyalty, patriotism, citizenship training, agricultural education, and the organization of rural young America in the words of our pledge, "for my home, my community and my country."

Again I bid you all a very happy New Year.